

Croissants Form the Basis for a Community: Gayle's Bakery

By Don Monkerud

Gayle's Bakery and its delicious baked goods reflect Gayle Ortiz's independence, creativity, and determination, rooted in her early family life. Gayle was born and raised in San Jose and grew up in a typical middle-class home; her father was the general manager of Carnation Milk, and her mother stayed at home. Her creativity came from her mother, who imparted a love of crafts to her. Her mother was always working on a creative project of some sort and couldn't sit still without knitting, sewing, or making things from paper. During the last part of her life, she made miniature dollhouses, a turn-of-the-century schoolhouse, and a millinery shop complete with tiny hats. Gayle inherited her mother's love of crafts and, for twenty years, made mosaic tables and other items from broken plates.

During Gayle's early years, her sister, four years older, was the good daughter, while Gayle was considered independent and wild. She ran away from home when she was four but called her mother and asked to be picked up after riding her bicycle as far as Los Gatos. She insisted on determining her own life and making her own decisions in high school and attributes this independent streak to her overprotective parents. Her father came from an Irish Catholic family of six who were always drinking and getting into some sort of trouble. Seeking to protect his daughters from the bad experiences of his own siblings, he kept a tight rein on his daughters. Although she was the vice president of her class and a cheerleader with good grades, Gayle felt stifled, chafing under the strict rules and yearning for independence.

"My dad kept a tight rein, and the tighter he got, the wilder I got," Gayle recounted. "The last half of my senior year, I met a biker in my class who was truly wild. My parents put their foot down and said I couldn't see him, which only made me want to see him more."

Her biker boyfriend joined the army after high school and called Gayle from Kentucky just before the finals of her freshman year in college. He was shipping out to Vietnam in three months and asked her to marry him. Although she was only 17 and needed her parents' approval, Gayle dropped out of school and went to Kentucky to

marry. There, in a state where cousins marry cousins, her age was no problem, although she still recalls her discomfort at having to kiss the huge judge who was smoking a foul cigar when he read them their vows.

She spent four very exciting married years to become the normal one in her family. Her husband returned from Vietnam with malaria and “even more emotionally damaged than he was when he left.” They lived in San Jose, where her husband bought a new motorcycle and began to take long motorcycle trips. Unannounced absences of a day or two grew into weeks. Gayle couldn’t stand it. She moved in with a roommate when he was gone, and he reacted violently upon his return. She had him arrested.

Gayle had already met Joe Ortiz, who was dating her roommate, and he came back into her life after she split up with her husband. Joe had dropped out of law school and was painting houses when he accepted Gayle’s invitation to dinner. He came to dinner and didn’t leave. They moved to San Francisco where Joe returned to law school, only to find out why he had left in the first place. Restless, Joe moved to Colorado for two months with a friend to paint houses. When he returned, the landlord raised the rent on their Castro-district house from \$300 to \$900 a month, and they decided to move to Capitola, where Gayle vacationed as a child. Both of them commuted to San Francisco—Joe painting houses and Gayle waitressing—until she got a job in 1974 as a waitress at the Edgewater Restaurant in Santa Cruz. At that point, she had no idea that her life was about to change drastically as she soon forged a new life running a bakery.

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Smoke billowed from the oven. The air grew thick with the smell of burning butter. If there had been a fire alarm, it would have awakened the whole neighborhood, jarred the windows, and screeched across the early dawn like a fire truck. Luckily, there was no fire, only the haunting failure of a batch of croissants.

Opening the door to the oven, Gayle discovered that her carefully placed layers of butter, interspersed coil by coil with rolled dough, had simply melted and run out onto the pan. The puny lumps of scorched dough didn’t look anything like the picture in the cookbook. And she had followed the cookbook directions to the letter.

Why such a failure? She liked to bake too—cakes and cookies in high school, albeit with similar results—until she discovered boys. Now an adult, she knew how to

follow a recipe and desperately wanted success.

She realized baking the perfect croissant would be difficult because she had never tasted a croissant. But she was determined to be successful, even though her baking career was somewhat of a fluke. When commuting to San Francisco to paint houses, Joe, now her husband, came home one day with a proposition from a chef who wanted to trade baking classes in exchange for Joe painting the cooking school. What would he do with cooking classes? Although the painting job didn't come through, Gayle jumped at the opportunity to take classes with Flo Baker, a well-known bakery chef at the time who later achieved national renown. For eight weeks, Gayle drove to the city every Thursday and made three or four pastries in the morning before driving home to her job as a cocktail waitress in the Crow's Nest at the Yacht Harbor.

Fortuitously, Gayle met the owner of Chez Panisse in Berkeley and discovered that Linda Sheer, the pastry chef, was going to Europe in the summer of 1976 and needed someone to take her place for several months. The task was daunting; she would be cooking for a well-known restaurant, rapidly gaining a reputation for California cuisine, but Gayle would be working with another woman, so the burden wouldn't fall entirely on her. Taking a leave of absence from the Crow's Nest, Gayle decided to try it. Two days into the job, the other woman had a nervous breakdown and left Gayle on her own. Despite long hours and hot ovens, Gayle discovered that she loved baking. She even mastered baking delicate croissants and decided to see where baking might lead. She returned home to Capitola and began baking to earn extra money, meeting some success baking cakes for local restaurants and stores.

"I got up every morning at 6 a.m., made croissants from the dough I'd made the day before, let them rest under tea towels, ate breakfast, put the croissants in the oven, and took a shower," Gayle said. "Then I'd go out and sell the croissants, getting back in time for my job at the Crow's Nest. I'd come home at 2 p.m. and start over, again making dough for the next day."

She began to save her tips and wages, which slowly accumulated until she had \$ 3,000. Joe continued to paint houses in San Francisco, but he grew tired of the fine layer of flour covering everything in the house. Sixty-eight pounds of butter filled the refrigerator. Cases of yeast were stacked everywhere. Sacks of flour rested in mounds.

“You have to get this out of the house,” Joe advised. They began looking for a place to move and found an 850-square-foot building in Capitola at the corner of Bay and Capitola Avenue, the present location of Gayle’s Bakery. Her father was in the restaurant equipment business, and when she came to him with the idea of opening a bakery, he tried to talk her out of it. He had seen too many restaurants go out of business and lose their homes, life savings, and investors’ money. Gayle persisted and finally, he gave in, agreeing to match her \$3000. Her sister knew a banker who would lend them another \$3000. They accumulated \$9000, which wasn’t enough to open a bakery. Gayle went to the loan officer at Wells Fargo, who had loaned her the money for her Volkswagen, and he agreed to match what she had raised. She asked him to round it off to \$10,000, and he agreed.

But she wasn’t quite ready yet. “You have to have warm bread if you’re going to run a bakery,” her father insisted. They both looked at Joe, who could do anything. Bread dough looked like the spackle he used to fill cracks in a paint job, Joe reasoned, so, on that slim comparison, Joe began baking. Gayle gave him a 30-quart floor mixer, a 100-pound sack of flour, salt, yeast, and water, and Joe made baguettes. Gretchen Friedwald, a longtime friend and roommate who recently passed away, agreed to be the salesperson. Kelly Porter, who later opened Kelly’s Bakery in Aptos, came to work the next week, and they launched the business, opening their doors on Valentine’s Day, 1978.

“We worked our butts off,” said Gayle. “We came to work at 3 a.m., and Joe left to paint houses at 8. He’d come back at 5 p.m.; we’d close at 6, spend an hour cleaning up, and then go home and eat dinner. Then we’d get up the next day and start all over again.”

The Bakery made money from the beginning. But a year-and-a-half later, they needed an infusion of new recipes and techniques. Where did one go to learn baking? From the masters, of course. So Gayle and Joe headed to Paris. They wandered the streets checking with bakery owners who could teach them how to make French pastries. They weren’t having any luck when, weary from being rejected, they chanced upon a sign for *The Federation of French Bakers*. The president saw them right away. In broken French, they told him they came to Paris to study baking and asked if he could recommend anyone. He went to a 25-foot-long card index that contained information on the

federation's 1200 members and pulled out a single card. "He had the perfect man for us to study with," Gayle said. **HIS NAME HERE** and his wife loved foreigners. We've been back to study with him three times. He was the inspiration for Joe's book, *The Village Baker*.

Gayle attributes the success of the bakery to her customers, who are well-educated world travelers. Many are wealthy and sophisticated but want to live outside the glitter and bustle of a large city. Every day, she overheard customers commenting that they traveled all over the world but preferred to live here.

In 2001, Gayle said, "Santa Cruz has changed drastically since I opened my business 23 years ago. It's become a big city with traffic congestion and big box stores. If I didn't have the business, I don't know if I'd stay; my family and many friends moved away."

Yet she found a significant positive in the close-knit community. The community was a mere two-and-a-half square miles with a population of 10,000, made up of different neighborhoods. When she attended professional meetings in the San Francisco Bay area, she found that other business owners weren't willing to contribute to their communities. None of their communities knew what they contributed, an experience very different from Gayle's. The bakery gave to many local charities and events, and they thanked Gayle daily, a fact she attributed to people feeling a stronger connection to local businesses. As an illustration, she pointed to the difficulty national chains experienced when locals reacted negatively to the intrusion of Boston Market, Crown Books, Sizzler Restaurant, and Red Lobster, all of which went out of business despite extensive advertising. New developments by Borders Books and Home Depot also met considerable resistance.

"Lots of chains have trouble in this community," she said. "I feel a strong symbiosis with the community from living in Capitola. I live a block from city hall and know the firemen, the policemen, and the city council members, and there's something wonderful about that."

Her involvement with and concern for the community led to Gayle's decision to run for the city council despite the sometimes tumultuous and fractious debates that often racked the council. She was concerned about traffic and congestion because Capitola

“was a bubble in a changing sea of traffic,” a shortcut for those seeking to avoid Highway One. Zoning studies were in drastic need of revision. Her vision of Capitola was to keep the look and feel it had back in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, but with an updated economy; yesterday’s physical layout with a modern economy. She sought to protect and upgrade the 41st Avenue corridor, where businesses produced city tax revenues to support the police and fire departments, public works projects, and many non-profit and city programs.

“Capitola has some of the best city services in California because we have 41st Avenue, and I want to make sure the business district remains viable,” Gayle said. “I’m not anti-business or anti-big business; there’s a size and place for everything. I’d like to see more hotels in Capitola and more cultural activities. The more hotels, the greater the sales tax revenue.”

Her entrance into the fray of city government was based on a belief that the city council was more amenable to change. Although civility was essential to her, Gayle said she was a scrapper and would shout back if people shouted at her. In reality, she hoped for less screaming and fewer city council fights because the majority on the council was ushering in a new era. Rather than condemning the city decisions, as those who spoke out against the Redtree Properties development project for, or having an abrasive style, Gayle hoped to change the approach.

“We needed to move on to positive things, like the slow speed at which government moved, which is shocking when you’re involved,” Gayle said. She wanted to bring business skills to the process. “Why not run government like a business? Many say we can’t continue doing business at a snail’s pace. People must know they can effect change; we need another way of doing business in town hall politics.”